

“Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.”

The Sabbatical Report of Rev. Matthew A. Smith,
Bethlehem Evangelical Lutheran Church, Lansing, Michigan,
April 18 through July 11, 2022

*to Michelle, Chloe, and Madelyn,
my heart, my encouragement, and my love ...*

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to the good people of Bethlehem Evangelical Lutheran Church for granting me this sabbatical. Thank you, Sister Diane Zerfais, OP, of the Dominican Center at Marywood, for serving as my Spiritual Director on this journey. Thank you to Brian Johnson and heroic.us for equipping me with the tools we all need for this life to have ready at hand, and the VIA Institute. Thank you to Thom Rainer and all the leaders at Church Answers for your wisdom, training, and certification as a Church Revitalization Consultant. Thank you to all the individuals, authors, pastors, and presenters who guided my journey, including Susan Beaumont, Cynthia Bourgeault, Rev. John Burow, CJ Clark, Executive Director, Living Water Ministries, Mark Clifton, Mike Hamel, Fire Chief, Meridian Township, Andrew Pettegree, Trevor Moawad, Sam Rainer, Fr. Richard Rohr, SJ, Rev. Dr. Craig A. Satterlee, Bishop, and Rev. John and Phyliss Schleicher.

- Introduction -

I bring you grace, peace, and love in the name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Citing the Biblical basis for a sabbatical leave (Ezekiel 20:12 and Leviticus 25:1-7), the Compensation Guidelines of the North/West Lower Michigan Synod of the ELCA recommend that a sabbatical leave is to be granted to provide an opportunity for a full-time pastor to take an extended period of time on sabbatical for renewal, enrichment, study, spiritual growth, travel, skill development and/or research. The policy recommends that a 12-week sabbatical be granted for every five years of service under call to a given congregation.^{1 2}

I began planning for my sabbatical in the summer of 2019. It was approved by the congregation in January of 2020 and set to begin on Easter Monday, April 13, 2020. And then in March, our world went sideways. A coronavirus has caused a global pandemic that has gripped the world, known as COVID-19. In partnership with the leadership of the congregation, my sabbatical for 2020 was quickly postponed until Easter Monday of 2021 as our country and our congregations scrambled to find ways to make things work while in lockdown. With seemingly no end in sight for the pandemic, my sabbatical was postponed a second time to Easter Monday of 2022. Even though the pandemic continued, congregational leadership felt that I should not postpone this sabbatical a third time.

In 2019, I began planning the focus of my sabbatical as Prayer, Health and Wellness, and Church Revitalization, fulfilling the synod recommendation that this extended period of study and renewal have a focus beneficial to the rostered leader as well as the congregation. Over the years of delay, *how* I would focus on Prayer, Health and Wellness, and Church Revitalization changed (as available resources changed), but my focus did not.

The theme verse I selected for my sabbatical was 1 Samuel 3:9, "Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" My intention was that I would listen for God's voice in centering prayer, on silent retreat, in physical exercise, and in study for certification as a Church Revitalization Consultant. How this was accomplished is recorded in the pages that follow.

¹ North/West Lower Michigan Synod 2022 Compensation Guidelines for Ministers of Word and Sacrament (Pastors), Ministers of Word and Service (Deacons), Synodically Authorized Ministers, and Other Staff <https://mittensynod.org/docs/CompensationGuidelines2022.pdf> accessed 9/16/22.

² This policy also states that, "Within six weeks of completion of the sabbatical leave, the rostered minister shall present the congregation or synod organization with a written reflection on the experience including implications for the organization's ministry and beyond, as applicable." Our Revitalization Plan, which was intended to be the product of my sabbatical, was presented to the Congregation Council on August 18, 2022 (within 6 weeks of the end of my sabbatical). This full report was presented to the congregation on September 18, 2022.

- Prayer -

One result of this sabbatical I have found is that I get energized when talking, preaching, and writing about prayer. I believe that this energy comes from the Holy Spirit. God is at work, and we have been invited to be part of what God is up to. I also believe that this energy comes from my experience on sabbatical focusing on prayer, weekly spiritual direction, my daily prayer (with an emphasis on Centering Prayer), and attending a six-day silent, directed prayer retreat in Northern Michigan. My daily prayer routine is outlined below.

Daily Prayer

I begin my *morning prayer* time with Martin Luther's Morning Prayer from the Small Catechism followed by the prayer of St. Ignatius. Following these, I read the two Daily Texts from the Moravian Church and pray their prayer for the day. I then review a list of my top two virtues or character strengths³ (Spirituality and Love of Learning) along with the eight virtues that ancient wisdom and modern science agree are the most important for flourishing (Wisdom, Self-Mastery, Courage, Love, Hope, Gratitude, Curiosity, and Zest). This review includes two or three scriptures supporting each virtue, and a breath virtue statement after each, before moving to the next virtue. This prayerful review of character strengths, scripture and breathing is followed by 20 minutes of centering prayer and journaling.

Luther's Morning Prayer (Small Catechism)

In the name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank you, Heavenly Father, through your dear Son, Jesus Christ, that you have kept me this night from all harm and all danger; and I pray that you would keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and my life may please you. For into your hands, I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen.

The Prayer of St. Ignatius⁴

Take, Lord, receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, my whole will, all that I have and all that I possess. You gave it all to me, Lord; I give it all back to you. Do with it as you will, according to your good pleasure. Give me your love and your grace; for with this I have all that I need. Amen.

Daily Texts⁵

³ You can discover your top 24 Character Strengths and much more for free at:

<https://www.viacharacter.org/character-strengths>

⁴ This is the prayer that framed my twelve weeks of spiritual direction with Sr. Diane Zerfais, OP, at the Dominican Center at Marywood in Grand Rapids. St. Ignatius was a contemporary of Martin Luther. Though they never met there is some written evidence that St. Ignatius at least knew of Martin Luther.

⁵ https://www.moravian.org/daily_texts/

Virtue Prayer with Scripture⁶

Spiritually (Faith)

² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.
- 1 Corinthians 2:2

³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. - Romans 8:38-39

¹³ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. - Romans 15:13

“By God’s grace I have the **Spirituality (Faith)** to keep God at the center of everything I do as I live my purpose in my Energy, and my Work, and my Love today.” *Breathing in the Spirit’s presence (6,1,8). Breathing out.* ⁷

Love of Learning

⁹ Eli said to Samuel, “Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” - 1 Samuel 3:9

⁵ You must make every effort to support your faith with goodness (ARETÈ)⁸, and ARETÈ with knowledge, ⁶ and knowledge with self-mastery, and self-mastery with endurance, and endurance with godliness, ⁷ and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. - 2 Peter 1:5-7

“By God’s grace I have the **Love of Learning** to grow deeper in my levels of knowledge and understanding today.” *Breathing in the knowledge that surrounds us. Breathing out.*

Wisdom

⁵ If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. - James 1:5

⁶ The first two virtues listed are my two virtues (character strengths) according to my testing through <https://www.viacharacter.org/>. The remaining eight are the most important character strengths (virtues) according to ancient wisdom and modern science through the work of Brian Johnson at <http://heroic.us>.

⁷ I use a breathing pattern of 6, 1, 8, breathing in through the nose for a count of 6, holding for 1, and exhaling through the nose for 8. This is the breathing pattern that works for me based on my lung capacity. This, and any of the statements herein regarding health and wellness, should not be taken as medical advice. Please consult your physician before beginning any breathing or exercise practice.

⁸ ARETÈ is the Greek word for goodness or excellence. I have it tattooed in Greek on my left forearm (ἀρετή). This is how we are called to live by God. As we all know, there is a gap between who God wants us to be and how we are actually behaving in any given moment. Living with ARETÈ means closing that gap with each decision we make.

¹⁷ Moses's father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good. ¹⁸ You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you, for the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. ¹⁹ Now listen to me... ²¹ You should look for able folks among all the people, those who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain; set them as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. ²² Let them always sit as judges for the people; let them bring every important case to you but decide every minor case themselves. So, it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. - Exodus 18:17-19a, 21-22⁹

"By God's grace I have the **Wisdom** to know the game¹⁰ I'm playing and how to play it well today." *Breathing in with calm confidence and fierce resolve. Breathing out.*

Self-Mastery

¹¹ Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. - Hebrews 12:11

¹³ Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. - Philippians 3:13-14

God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. - 2 Timothy 1:7

"By God's grace I have the **Self-Mastery** to play this game well today." *Breathing in with a smile. Breathing out.*

Courage

³² David said to Saul, "Let no one's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine." - 1 Samuel 17:32

³³ (Jesus said) I have said this to you so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution but take courage: I have conquered the world!" - John 16:33

"By God's grace I have the **Courage** to be willing to act in the face of fear today." *Breathing in as you sit up with dignity and 'pull that thread through your head'. Breathing out.*

Love

³⁴ When the Pharisees heard that [Jesus] had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵ and one of them, an expert in the law, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" ³⁷ He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' ³⁸ This is the greatest and

⁹ All Scripture verses are from the NRSV, unless otherwise noted, with minor variations for readability.

¹⁰ Referring to life as a 'game' is in no way meant to minimize the importance of life. It is simply intended to help us not take life too seriously.

first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." - Matthew 22:37-40

¹⁸ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. - 1 John 4:18-19

"By God's grace I have the **Love** to be connected, and present, and encouraging, especially for my family, today." *Breathing in as we open our hearts. Breathing out.*

Hope

⁷ Of this Gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. ²⁰ Now to him who by the power at work within us can accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. - Ephesians 3:7, 20-21

¹⁹ We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, ²⁰ where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. - Hebrews 6:19-20

²⁶ But Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible." - Matthew 19:26

"By God's grace I have the **Hope** to see a better future and to know that with God's help I can create it as well as the pathways to achieve it today." *Breathing in as we lean into life's challenges. Breathing out.*

Gratitude

¹⁹ Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." - Luke 22:19

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. - 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

"By God's grace I have the **Gratitude** to see all the blessings and gifts in my life today." *Breathing in as we celebrate the beauty that surrounds us. Breathing out.*

Curiosity

⁶ Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; ⁷ let the wicked forsake their way and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. ⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. ⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.
- Isaiah 55:6-9

¹ I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, based on God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. ² Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

- Romans 12:1-2

“By God’s grace I have the **Curiosity** to stay open to life; to see what’s working and what needs work today.” *Breathing in as we open up. Breathing out.*

Zest

¹³ For it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure ¹⁵ so that you may... shine like stars in the world. - Philippians 2:13, 15a & c

¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. - Matthew 5:16

⁸ Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence (ARETÈ) and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. - Philippians 4:8

“By God’s grace I have the **ZEST** to dominate the fundamentals to be my best in everything I do in my Energy, in my Work, and in my Love today. And BOOM, let it be so. Amen.” *Breathing in full alignment with God. Breathing out.*

Centering Prayer Instructions¹¹

1. Be clear and strong about your **intention** to be fully available to God - at the depths of your being - to give yourself completely to God’s presence.
2. Set a timer for a minimum of 20 minutes and stick to whatever time you set.
3. With eyes closed, sit up with dignity in your chair (feet on the floor) or kneeling on your cushions.
4. As you begin, become aware of your breathing (6/1/8). After a few breaths, become aware that you are aware. Start your timer and introduce your sacred word.
5. When you notice that you are no longer attracted to thinking, let your sacred word go.
6. When you find yourself thinking, thank God for those thoughts (or the ability to think), and graciously let them go without judgement.
7. Use your sacred word to return to your intended state of open availability to God as often as you need.
8. As your time comes to an end, do not rush to get up. Sit with what has happened in this time and give thanks to God.

¹¹ Adapted from *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind – a New Perspective on Christ and His Message* Cynthia Bourgeault (2008) and from Thomas Keating, www.contemplativeoutreach.org.

Centering Prayer Opening...

Abba, Father-God, in this time, quiet my mind. Keep me from thought. I set my intention to be fully available to you, at the very depths of my being, knowing that all I need in this time is to give myself completely to your presence, that I may simply be; open to your will. Amen.¹²

Journal

My morning journaling then includes writing out statements of affirmation and journaling on whichever of the scripture verses that I have read that morning from the Daily Texts or from my own Virtue Prayer scripture that is grabbing my attention. It is also a time where I right down any persistent thoughts that may have entered my awareness during Centering Prayer. This could be something that has more of my attention than it needs, or at times, something God wants me to be aware of.

For my *evening prayer* time, after I have turned off my electronics, I pray Martin Luther's evening prayer from the Small Catechism and revisit my virtue prayer (without the Scripture verses) in a spirit of thanksgiving ("God, thank you for granting me...") with a breath following each one. This is followed by another 20 minutes of Centering Prayer and the journaling practice of Examen. I then lift to God any prayer concerns from the day and conclude with the Lord's Prayer.

Luther's Evening Prayer (Small Catechism)

In the name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank you, Heavenly Father, through your dear Son, Jesus Christ, that you have graciously kept me this day; and I pray that you would forgive me all my sins where I have done wrong, and graciously keep me this night. For into your hands, I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen.

Virtue Thanksgiving Prayer

Centering Prayer

Examen Journaling

1. Request the Spirit to lead you through your review of the day.
2. Relish the moments that went well and all the gifts you have today (Gratitude 3x2).
3. Review the day. (What went well? What needs work? How can you optimize?)
 - a. Where did you feel most connected to God?
 - b. Where did you feel least connected to God?

¹² This prayer is based on what I have learned and experienced in my own Centering Prayer practice. Centering Prayer is a time of being present and fully available to God. It is a time of listening.

4. Repent of any mistakes or failures. (Own your actions with full acceptance.)
5. Resolve, in concrete ways, to live tomorrow well.
 - a. What are your #1 tasks in my Energy, Work, and Love for tomorrow?
 - b. What gifts from God will you need for tomorrow?
6. Conclude in thanksgiving with prayer.

Personal Prayer

The Lord's Prayer

Silent, Directed Prayer Retreat

This six-day experience took place June 19 through June 25, 2022 at the Sacramentine Monastery Retreat Center in Conway, MI.

I did not know what to expect from this experience. There were 13 of us on retreat, and other than my spiritual director I knew no one. Still, it was difficult not talking. The days began with breakfast, which was silent, as were all meals. This allowed me to learn and practice prayerful eating, savoring the aroma of the food, trying to taste the distinct flavors in each reasonably sized bite, and giving thanks to God for creating such a diverse eco-system, and thanking God for all the people who labored to bring that food in front of me. Put your fork down after each bite and take a sip of water.

After breakfast we would spend an hour in spiritual direction. This was the only time we were allowed to speak. Those sessions would focus on what we were experiencing in what we hoped to get out of the retreat. My hope was that on retreat I would learn to mend my nets so that I could pick them up to follow Jesus more closely.

After direction I would read scripture, pray, and reflect on my experience with God as I walked the Prayer Labyrinth or the Stations of the Cross at the retreat center. Then there would be more time for prayer and journaling and exploring the beauty of Northern Michigan, including my childhood home of Harbor Springs. I spent two nights on the shores of Lake Michigan, watching the sunset and giving thanks to God for our marvelous creation.

Valhalla Ladder



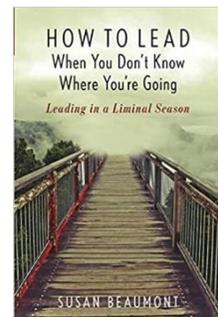
During those sunsets I collected wood to make driftwood garlands to commemorate my sabbatical. The driftwood garland is based on the 'Valhalla Ladder', which comes to us from Norse (Viking) tradition. As a sea-faring culture, whenever Vikings would go on a journey, they would collect a piece of driftwood from the shores of their destination. When they returned home, they would string the piece of driftwood with other pieces they had collected throughout their lives, making a Valhalla Ladder. These pieces of driftwood memorialized each trip. Taken together they represented a sum of life. Each piece was a step up the ladder to Valhalla (heaven).

The driftwood garland pictured here is one of several I created as a way to memorialize my sabbatical. The pieces of driftwood were all collected from the shores of Lake Michigan (Lake Michigan Shores Roadside Park, to be exact) at sunset on June 21 and June 22, the Summer Solstice. The pieces were then prayerfully strung together in thanksgiving for the opportunity for sabbath rest in God's creation.

Books I read related to Prayer and Spirituality:

***How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season.* Beaumont, Susan (2019)**

This book is about leading in a time when an organization is stuck (or finds itself in) between an ending and a new beginning, when the old ways of doing things no longer work and a way forward is not yet clear. These in-between times are known as 'liminal' seasons. Living in liminal space is about being that leads to becoming. We do not yet fully know what will happen next, but we can learn much about who we are in this time. Beaumont writes about the importance of holding steady, finding soul in place, seeing what God is up to, and telling our story.



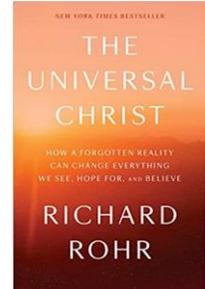
Our story at Bethlehem is at the heart of who we are (and who we are becoming). Our upcoming 100th Anniversary is the right time for us to remember our sacred work, and how Christ's story of death and resurrection is our story. Our memories of the past ground our hope for the future. Christ's resurrection didn't just happen one Sunday long ago but happens every Sunday, whenever we share the bread and wine of Holy Communion.

There are many stories of who we have been in the past 100 years. One story that has always seemed vitally important to me is the story that I have been told about why, in the mid 1990's, Bethlehem chose to remain in the Baker Neighborhood and expand rather than buy property and build in a suburb. Bethlehem has remained in the neighborhood because we are committed to outreach in the area in which we have been planted.

We will be tying our Church Revitalization efforts to the 100th Anniversary of Bethlehem on September 24, 2024.

***The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe.* Rohr, Richard (2019)**

Just as the Church was ripe for and in dire need of reformation in the 16th century, we need a reformation today, more than 500 years later. If the biblically based teachings of Rohr’s work are taken seriously by Christians around the globe, great change will come. In this work, Rohr writes on Jesus, but not so much the historical Jesus, but Jesus as the Christ, the anointed one of God.



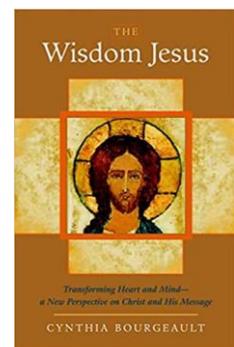
The words from the dust jacket sum this book up better than I could hope to: “Drawing on scripture, history, and spiritual practice, Rohr articulates a transformative view of Jesus Christ as a portrait of God’s constant, unfolding work in the world. ‘God loves things by becoming them,’ he writes, and Jesus’s life was meant to declare that humanity has never been separate from God—except by its own negative choice[s]. When we recover this fundamental truth, faith becomes less about proving Jesus was God, and more about learning to recognize the Creator’s presence all around us, and in everyone we meet.

Thought-provoking, practical, and full of deep hope and vision, *The Universal Christ* is an invitation to contemplate how God liberates and loves all that is.”

Rohr writes about how love and suffering are ways of knowing (207). We all know what it is to suffer. We have all suffered in one way or another and to greater or lesser extents following the global health crisis that began in 2019. And it is my deepest prayer that everyone would know what it means to love. We often hear people talking about *dealing* with suffering. We rarely hear people talk about love as something that we ‘deal with’, but it is something that we learn to deal with, learn to accommodate in our lives. Love and suffering are necessary for God to teach us about life. Love and suffering actually deal with *us*. It is our call in the church to help people understand meaning in both love and suffering. God loves us unconditionally, and God understands suffering more deeply than most of us ever will.

***The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind--A New Perspective on Christ and His Message.* Bourgeault, Cynthia (2008)**

As God incarnate, Jesus was the greatest wisdom teacher to ever walk the earth. But much of that wisdom has been obscured by how the church has taught Jesus in a simple way: Jesus was nice and wants us to be nice. The only true salvation comes from knowing Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior. While both statements are right and true in their own ways, most of us cling to this so strongly that we can easily miss Jesus as a wisdom teacher who taught the transformation of consciousness through prayer and meditation practices that continue to be available to us.



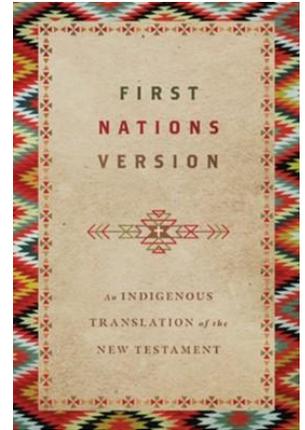
Bourgeault encourages us to put aside what we THINK we have learned about what Jesus was all about through the Bible. When we can begin to embrace Jesus as a true teacher of the transformation of consciousness, the meaning of Christ opens to us in a whole new way. Through the exploration of Jesus’ teachings and the mysteries of God incarnate, we can learn the singleness of heart he embodied Christ.

First Nations Version: An Indigenous translation of the New Testament
Intervarsity Press (2021)

I was troubled when I learned of this translation. I feared that it could be seen as just one more way the white colonialists are using to attempt to abolish the religion of the First Nations People. It made me think of the horror endured by First Nations children, ripped from their parents, hair shorn, forced to wear American clothes, and only allowed to speak English. But, when I began to read the First Nations Version (FNV) of the New Testament and saw how authentically it has been crafted, I know that I will keep this ready at hand in my sermon writing and study.

I have almost all the 20+ scriptures that I read every morning taken from the FNV for mornings I want to be fully open to Creator Sets Free (Jesus) as I embrace my identity as a created being. People from 12 different North American tribal identities helped create this translation. Names of people and places have been translated into the First Nation's way of naming. Creator Sets Free is what the name Jesus means through its Hebrew roots. Moses is known as Drawn from the Water, which is what his name means in the original Hebrew.

The FNV is a retelling of Creator's Story using language and cultural idioms that are based on the Native heart languages spoken by the First Nations People. Though in so many cases these languages have disappeared, the tradition of storytelling lives on among the First Nations. It is a blessing to read the story of how much God loves us and all creation expressed in the First Nation's way of knowing.



- Health and Wellness -

For my focus on Prayer, I had a Spiritual Director. For my Focus on Church Revitalization, I had a certification course with 17 lessons, five books to study, and online interaction with pastoral leaders from around the world. For my focus on Health and Wellness, I can see by the length and depth of the other two sections that it would have been helpful to have a Personal Trainer for my Health and Wellness journey. Alas, I did not.

During my sabbatical I did ride my bike, some. I did exercise, some. I did pay some attention to my diet, especially my goal of drinking 100 ounces of water per day. Overall, I wanted to lose the 20 extra pounds that I have been carrying around while on sabbatical. Instead, I have ended this sabbatical about 20 pounds heavier than when I started.

In my original sabbatical plan from 2019 I intended to ride my bike in the Bike MS fundraising event. In 2022 (with the limited training I did on sabbatical) I am riding my bike as part of Team Basecamp to raise \$2,000 for Living Water Ministries in support of the two teams of twelve that are running 200+ miles in 24 hours. Each runner completes three legs of varying distances during the 24 hours. One of the legs on the course goes from my second hometown of Frankfort, MI to Benzonia, about 7.2 miles. I have partnered with the runner of this leg so that he will text me as he begins each of his runs. I will then ride my bike the same distance he is running at the same time. We will finish by having a video call with each other at the end of his final leg.

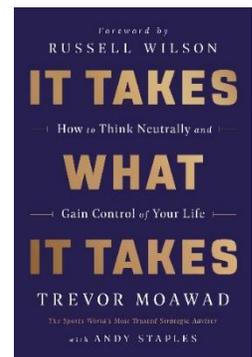
One book I listened to related to Health and Wellness while on sabbatical is:

It Takes What It Takes: How to Think Neutrally and Gain Control of Your Life
Trevor Moawad, with Andy Staples (2020)

At its core, this book and Trevor's training of hundreds of athletes is centered on the concept of Neutral Thinking. What we need to do to accomplish any task in life is neither good nor bad. It is neutral. It simply takes what it takes to do what we want to do. This relates to our Health and Wellness goals, and it also relates to the goal of Church Revitalization. If we are truly committed to revitalization, we will do what needs to be done. It takes what it takes. The results are left for the Holy Spirit to decide.

Trevor Moawad is thought of as *the most trusted mental coach in the world of sports*. As such he has worked with the likes of Michael Jordan, Russell Wilson, Nick Saban, and Kirby Smart. Moawad's work has helped them all achieve at the highest levels of their sports. If we apply his way of Neutral Thinking to what we do as the Body of Christ, we too can be successful in doing what we are called to do.

One of his biggest keys is replacing negativity with what he calls "neutral thinking." It is a non-judgmental, nonreactive way of looking at situations we might define as problematic, or even crises. This is about letting go of what has happened in the past, the decisions that got us where we are, and fully accepting that we are where we are. In neutral terms this means that where we find ourselves as individuals (and the church) simply is what it is. The key for us in letting go is in knowing that what has happened in the past is not predictive, it does not determine our future. What determines the future is what we choose to do in any given moment.



Trevor has athletes and coaches set PROCESS goals, not outcome goals. We cannot control outcomes as we cannot control the future. What we CAN control is the process we put in place, knowing that it takes what it takes. In this way, winning is about process. When we complete our process and work our system, we win. And, if we learn from our outcomes, whether we won or lost, we win again. In this way the game of life is not win or lose, it is win AND win.

The Secrets of Psychological Body Armor™

I did take one course related to health and wellness during my sabbatical. It was called “The Secrets of Psychological Body Armor™ (PBA) – Holistic Wellness for Emergency Services and Healthcare Professions.” I was connected to this training (paid for by Sparrow Hospital) by Mike Hamel, the Fire Chief of Meridian Township. Mike knows of my heart for working with people who are on the front lines when tragedy strikes, and that I would consider doing chaplaincy work in Meridian Township and Ingham County as part of a Certified Emergency Response Team.

This course is designed to coach people in building personal resilience and holistic health. This begins with learning to better manage the stress in your life to increase our potential for happiness, success, and even create a competitive advantage through the creation of what is called Psychological Body Armor™. Like Church Revitalization, there is no “quick fix” in this program.

In this course we learned to recognize resilient attitudes, use physical exercise and nutrition to aid the development of PBA, and use rest and spirituality to recharge and restore PBA (like a sabbatical!)

- Church Revitalization -

This was the main portion of my sabbatical focused on Bethlehem and congregational ministry. I am grateful for having the opportunity to learn so much that will benefit Bethlehem as we move toward our 100th Anniversary. I took a course (paid for by the N/W Lower MI Synod) called Church Revitalization Certification. I am now a Certified Church Revitalization Consultant through Church Answers. The course included reading 5 books related to church revitalization and 17 video sessions that were capped by online discussions with church leaders from around the globe.

Below you will find notes on each of the books, class notes, notes on other related books, and notes on various church visits. After this you will find the background material for our Revitalization Plan outlining all the building blocks we already have in place at Bethlehem for revitalization, and finally our Revitalization Plan itself (with some steps for revitalization already completed or in progress).

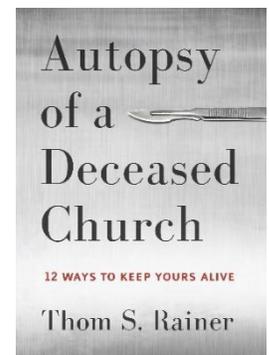
Church Revitalization Book Notes:

Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive. Rainer, Thom (2014)

This not a fun title to start with. Here Thom Rainer shows how there are no magical, easy solutions when it comes to revitalization. This book prompted me to listen to *I Am a Church Member* (see below) and caused me to revisit work I have done in Transformational Ministry, moving the congregation from being focused internally to being focused on mission, something absolutely required for church revitalization. It also got me thinking about our Discovering Discipleship Class which I am planning to refocus more intentionally around the Marks of Discipleship (rather than tagging them on at the end).

These were my takeaways:

1. Churches need to represent their communities. The reason for this is often that the children and grandchildren have moved away, and the church has not reached out effectively to the community. The idea Rainer presents is the idea of turning church leadership over to the community. Both a challenging and tremendous thought.
2. In the instances where the budget moved inwardly in churches it was understood that the staff exists to help the members feel comfortable, not for the sake of making disciples who make disciples. These churches die because they spend for their preferences, rather than for the needs of reaching the community. And, because of fear, money itself becomes the focus.
3. Many churches are suffering from something Rainer calls 'Great Commission Amnesia.' These churches stopped going out as disciples who make disciples, and they stopped depending on Christ. Members of dying churches only want growth that makes *them* feel comfortable.

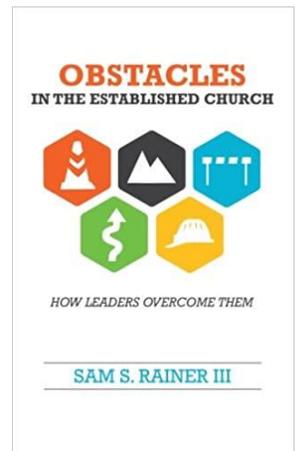


4. There is also the Preference Driven Church where it is all about me, myself, and I. Membership in a church is not a country club. It is not about paying dues and getting things. This wasn't Jesus. Putting on the mind of Christ means:
 - a. Not using our identity as children of God to our own advantage.
 - b. Emptying ourselves in total servanthood.
 - c. Humbling ourselves.
 - d. Being obedient even to the point of death.
5. Rainer found that in almost all cases, deceased churches rarely prayed together. Prayer was the lifeblood of the early church (Acts 2:42).
6. Often, deceased churches had no clear purpose. They moved from being gospel-centered and other-centered to being self-centered. In almost every case, deceased churches failed to develop specific plans to impact the community
7. There are four clear responses necessary when a church is sick:
 - a. Admit and confess their dire need.
 - b. Pray for Wisdom and Strength to do whatever is necessary.
 - c. Be willing to change radically
 - d. That change must lead to action and an outward focus.

Obstacles in the Established Church: How Leaders Overcome Them. Rainer, Sam (2014)

This book reminds us that change is hard, and the change required for church revitalization is hard. Four hurdles to change are a lack of intentionality, a lack of originality, using the wrong metrics or over-emphasizing them, and the ease of appeasement, just doing things to make people happy (which never leads to positive change).

A big reason churches resist change is that they believe change is not feasible. We always need to keep in mind that if God can save any person, God can revitalize any church. And, while we know that Bethlehem has changed a lot over the decades, we cannot lead our church through change unless we love where it is now, not where we hope it will be in the future, or where it once was in the past. This needs to be part of our celebrating the 100th Anniversary, not only celebrating the past, but celebrating where we are right now and our hopes for the future.



Sam outlines the principles for change as Pray, Love the People, Choose Your Battles, Realize Your Own Imperfections (consult church leaders), Affirm Traditions (that can be affirmed), Build on Successes, Allow for Open Discussion, Show Wisdom in Timing, Keep the Focus, Allow for a Trial Period for change, Expect Opposition, and Evaluate Change. That sounds like a solid way forward for us. We are currently already engaged in an intentional way with the first two. We need to celebrate what God has given us and remember that every church cannot be all things to all people. As we work for change, Rainer encourages us to Keep the status quo only when it includes discipline, or passion (discipleship), or is beneficial to God's mission through Bethlehem.

Some churches have unrealistic expectations when it comes to change (especially the pace of change). Is this true for us at Bethlehem?

As we seek to put this all together, an important question for revitalization that Sam would want us to ask is, “How excited and optimistic is the pastor?” Well, I have been told that the congregation has been witnessing a renewed energy in my preaching since I have returned, and I certainly feel it, especially right now when I preach and talk about Prayer and Church Revitalization.

Reclaiming Glory: Revitalizing Dying Churches. Clifton, Mark (2016)

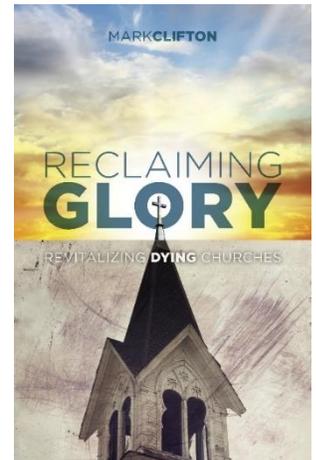
Of all the books required for the Church Revitalization Certification this was by far my favorite. Mark Clifton spent many years replanting churches that have been on life support or are simply at death’s door. There is much in replanting that applies to revitalization.

Both replanting and revitalization are about finding new life for dying churches. Fortunately for us, our God is all about bringing new life out of death. So, Clifton asks the question, “What is there about a dying church that brings God glory?” I would say that the answer to that is nothing, unless a church dies a good death and gives its remaining resources to bring new life to other missions or congregations. Then he asks, “What could your church do that would bring God the most glory?” This question should always be in the forefront of our minds and life of prayer as we work for revitalization.

When Clifton examines dying churches, he has discovered that dying churches have turned inward rather than focusing on the community, which they often blame for not coming, or note that the church is not what the people want. At Bethlehem, we did not have a Faith Family Fun Day or Neighborhood Kid’s Night to get people from the community into our church, we have done these things to get the people in our building into the community and into the lives of the people. One caveat he shares is that dying churches often have a structure that makes it difficult to pivot and join where God is already at work in the community. Revitalization means doing the hard work to become an indispensable part of the community. The right question as we begin revitalization is not, “How can we save this church?” but rather, “How can God get the most glory from our congregation right now?” How might we reclaim every square inch of our building and strategically use it for kingdom purposes?

The steps that Clifton outlines for replanting have much in common with the steps for revitalization.

- *Pray Without Ceasing* -Since prayer is the one thing that all revitalized churches have in common, therefore we have recruited a team of Prayer Warriors and engaged every member willing to take part in Prayers for Revitalization.
- *Love (and encourage) the Church’s Remaining Members* - Help them find the joy in what God has done for them and learn to share with others what God has been up to. This will be part of our work with the Marks of Discipleship, especially the mark of Encouraging Others.
- *Exegete The Community* - We think that we know our community, but we will be surprised when we see our Know Your Community Inventory (\$175 from Church Answers). Regardless of what existed in the community when the church was founded,



we must reach what is there today. That means investing time and other resources to discover what the needs are in the community right now.

- *Simplify Your Strategy* – FOCUS. We must be focused on God’s mission of revitalization at Bethlehem every step of the way.
- *Focus on Reaching Young Men* (and women) Let young leaders lead. Reach, disciple, and release them. Focus on 18-35. Be discipled so you can disciple others. Get involved in activities where young people are. We are in the process at Bethlehem of creating fellowship and study opportunities for this age group. These folks do exist on our rolls and obviously in our community. We need to invest our time and other resources to reach them.
- *Make Disciples Who Make Disciples* - This is about helping people learn to coach and be coached around the Marks of Discipleship. This the primary reasons we are reclaiming them as God’s mission for us.

Our story of transformation will be tied to our preparation for and celebrating our 100th Anniversary. We have many stories of the past to celebrate. We have much to celebrate about what God is doing in our lives and community right now. And, we have much to celebrate in the promise of new life that God has given us.

Anatomy of A Revived Church: Seven Findings of How Congregations Avoided Death. Rainer, Thom (2020)

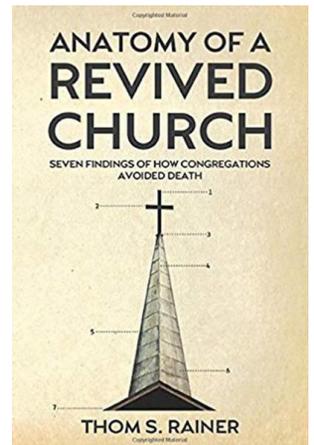
In his work with hundreds of churches, Thom Rainer has discovered seven things that all revived churches have in common. This book shares those seven findings and will help us face the reality of where we are. We must change or die. We must become relevant in the lives of people today as we find meaningful ways to share the good news of what God has done. But the good news for us on this journey is that if God can save any person, God can revitalize any church.

In revitalized churches, Rainer finds that they accept full responsibility for where they are. The fault is not with other churches, worship styles, the pastor, the denomination, the community, or the demographic. We must take full responsibility for who and WHOSE we are, where we are, and where we want to go.

This means overcoming the traps of tradition and expanding the scorecard to include tracking how people are living the Marks of Discipleship and tracking the new ways people are engaging with the ministry.

And all revitalized churches recognize the power of persistent prayer. No matter how few show up, or how long it takes to get the group together, keep praying. Prayer is not God’s guarantee, revitalization is up to God on God’s timing. But there are no examples of a revitalized congregation where powerful, persistent prayer was not present.

The process of revitalization is not easy. It is not quick. Revitalized churches have abandoned the notion of the pastor, finances, music styles, location or an upgrade to facility are the magic solution. What all revitalized churches also have in common is that they have found ways of choosing meaningful membership, moving from a low-expectation membership criteria to a



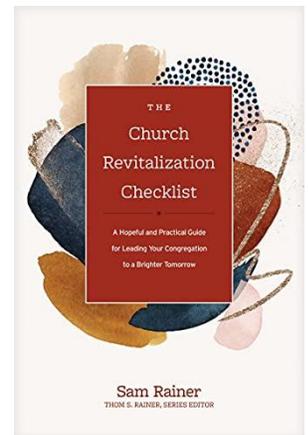
high-expectation membership criteria. The building block for this is already in place at Bethlehem in the Marks of Discipleship. For this reason, we will renew our focus on helping our members live the Marks, invite inactive members to reengage these practices for the sake of their faith, and retool our Marks of Discipleship (new member) Class around living the Marks, rather than just tacking them on at the end.

An effective membership (Discovering Discipleship) class will include information, expectations, and assimilation. Information being the beliefs and doctrine of the church, church staff introduction, denominational information, the vision of the church (mission, vision values right after doctrine). Here I would also want to include a BRIEF history of the congregation. We will also make video courses available online. In covering expectations, we will share opportunities to serve, and responsibilities tied to the vision. In emphasizing assimilation, every new member will be expected to be in a small group of some kind or serve in ministry in some way. In their first six months as members, they will serve as Greeters several times. For us, highly meaningful membership comes through the invitation to *practice* the Marks of Discipleship.

The Church Revitalization Checklist: A Hopeful and Practical Guide for Leading Your Congregation to a Brighter Tomorrow. Sam Rainer (2021)

Church revitalization is the process of leading an established church to a place of better health. I have said and will continue to say repeatedly that Bethlehem already has all the pieces that we need for revitalization. We simply need to put them together in the most effective way. Those will be outlined in the Background Information of the Revitalization Plan.

There were only four books required for completion of the Church Revitalization Certification Program, not including this one, but this book is essentially a summary and served as a companion to the course. Seven of the 17 lessons focused on each of the 7 P's of Revitalization that are full chapters in the book. The Seven P's are: Priorities, Pace, Perspective, People, Place, Purpose, Pathway. Rather than outlining them here, I will include them in the course notes.



Church Revitalization is about leading the church into a new era of optimism. It is about hitting the pause, and not the reset button. At Bethlehem we don't need to reset because we already have everything we need, all the building blocks, for revitalization. We just need to pause and revisit them. We recognize our need for revitalization. Now it is time for us to do what we say we will do and be who God has called us to be.

Course Notes

These notes are not a transcript of the full course. They are simply intended to highlight some key points in Church Revitalization.

1. *What is Revitalization Certification? – What Is Church Revitalization?*

They began by defining what church revitalization is. It is about taking a struggling church and bringing it back to life. Simply put it is: "The process by which a church becomes

healthier over time.” I asked other church leaders online to give me a definition of what a healthy church looked like, and they all said similar things about how a church is living the five Biblical purposes of the church. These are: Worship, Ministry, Mission, Fellowship (Membership), and Discipleship (Maturity). They are found in the Great Commandment and Great Commission in Matthew 22:37-40 and 28:19-20.

- a. *Worship Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength.*
- b. *Ministry Love your neighbor as if they were yourself,*
- c. *Mission Go to all nations baptizing and making disciples.*
- d. *Fellowship (Membership) Baptize*
- e. *Discipleship (Maturity) Teach them to obey God’s word.*

Well, at Bethlehem we know the Great Commandment and Commission and express them through the Marks of Discipleship!

2. *The Language of Revitalization*

Revitalization is about moving an existing church to a place of greater health as opposed to Adoption, Replanting, Fostering, Repurposing, or Planting.

3. *Internal Factors Driving the Need for Revitalization*

Of the roughly 400,000 churches in the U.S., 65% are in decline, but including those who have plateaued, 90% need to get healthier.

There are 6,000 to 10,000 church closures every year.

The #1 reason for the need for revitalization is that the people who are attending are attending less frequently.

4. *External Factors Driving the need for Revitalization*

- a. *Denominational Decline* – In 1988 the ELCA boasted more than 5 million members. Today the ELCA can barely claim 2 million (and I have recently heard the figure of 1.7 million).
- b. *Attendance Frequency Decline* – People simply no longer feel compelled to go to church, as they once did in the days of Christendom. What is important to know is that, **“The people that you have now are the people who really want to be there.”**
- c. *Shifting Demographics* – The growing rejection of Christianity in North America is a major shift, but not an excuse. Therefore it is important for us to know our community.

5. *Typology of Churches Needing Revitalization*

- a. *The Ex-Neighborhood Church* – This is Bethlehem
- b. *The Geriatric Church* – This is Bethlehem
- c. *The War-torn Church* – I do not believe this is Bethlehem.
- d. *The Mismatched Leadership Church* – I do not believe that this is Bethlehem.
- e. *The Great ‘Omission’ Church* – This is Bethlehem because we do not have an effective program of Evangelism.

6. *Introduction to the “Knows”*

7. *Know Your Self* – This about the importance of the leader knowing and understanding his/her areas of strengths or weaknesses.

8. *Know Your Church* – It is important for us to have good data/statistics/metrics for our church. We need to keep track of attendance better, track our budget and giving more clearly, and find ways to quantify engagement. How far is our reach?

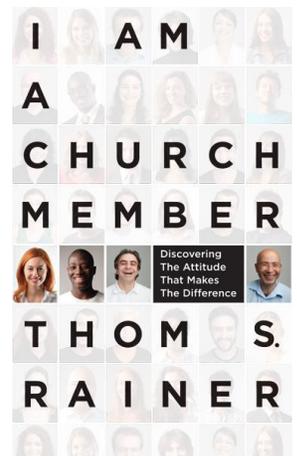
9. *Know Your Community* – The report for \$175 from Church Answers provides 35 pages of demographic information (who people are, age, race, etc.) and psychographic information (what people prefer, politics, shopping, etc.). This information will surprise us in many ways and show clear needs in the community.
10. *Understanding the 7 P's*
11. *Priorities: Tending to What Is Most Urgent* - What is most urgent is caring for and strengthening the faith of our members as we reach out and invite others to be a part of God's mission at Bethlehem and Evangelizing our neighborhood(s).
 - a. The first items in our Revitalization Plan will focus on membership; engaging in prayer, inviting inactive members to re-engage at Bethlehem, provide Bible Study and fellowship for all generations, and inviting former members of Calvary and St. Stephen to join us. These are the most urgent items.
 - b. While prayer is foundational, outreach to our community is fundamental. Some outreach activities are already happening, but as we learn more about the needs in our community, more will be added.
12. *Pace: How Fast Can the Church Move?* - As we work to reclaim the glory of God at Bethlehem, our pace is important. We are not going to change everything overnight. THERE ARE NO QUICK FIXES OR EASY ANSWERS. Most programmatic changes, changes in worship for example, will be dictated by the needs of those who are worshipping at Bethlehem as our worshipping community changes over time.
13. *Perspective: Managing Expectations* - We are called to dream about reaching our neighborhood(s). If we desire for our neighborhood and ministry what God desires, then any dream we have WILL become a reality. But, again, revitalization is not going to be easy, and it is not going to happen overnight.
14. *People: Our Capacity to Move Forward* - People relates to pace in that the people who have remained in attendance at Bethlehem through the pandemic have the best interest of Bethlehem in at heart. If they didn't want to see Bethlehem survive and thrive they wouldn't be here. This doesn't mean that people who have stopped attending don't want what is best for Bethlehem. It simply means that those who have remained are ready for change.
15. *Place: The Issue of Facilities* - Our facility is God's outpost for mission and ministry in the neighborhood(s) in which God has placed us. We need to invest in the maintenance of the facility for the purpose of meeting the needs of our community.
16. *Purpose: Rekindling an Outward Focus* - Our purpose, based in scripture, is to be disciples who make disciples. We focus inwardly in helping our members to grow as disciples. Our outward focus is for the purpose of helping other people learn and grow in faith as disciples.
17. *Pathway: The Realistic Next Step(s)* - The realistic first steps for us will be outlined in the first version of the plan. They will involve strengthening our current membership, reaching out to inactive members, reaching out to other Lutherans, reaching out to our neighborhood, learning the strengths of our congregation, and learning the needs of our community to identify additional practical next steps. The Revitalization Plan will be a living document. Many additional steps (things to implement) will be added in the future after we complete some form of the Know Your Church Report and obtain a Know Your Community Report.

Other books related to Church Revitalization:

I Am a Church Member. Rainer, Thom S. (2013)

Listening to this book had very little impact on my understanding of Church Revitalization... Rainer attempts to outline the attitudes and responsibilities of church members. He leans toward saying that church members should be obedient, rather than joy-filled, grateful members of the kingdom of God. He addresses without apology what is expected church members within the Body of Christ.

He encourages church members to be those who will unite rather than divide the community. That is the ideal. He also includes a discussion of what churches are like when they are preference driven rather than kingdom driven.



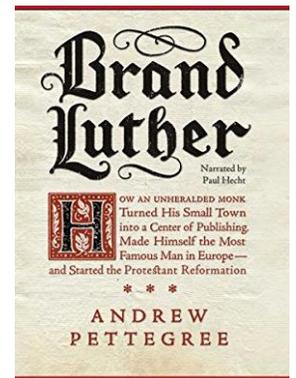
Brand Luther: How an Unheralded Young Minister Turned His Small German Town into a Center of Publishing, Made Himself the Most Famous Man in Europe - and Started the Protestant Reformation. (2015) Andrew Pettegree

This is a book that has been on my reading list for quite some time. I chose to incorporate it because I hoped it might somehow relate to church revitalization. What I discovered was a thorough history of the life and work of Martin Luther.

One of the main takeaways I had from this book was how Luther controlled every aspect of his published works whenever possible. We know that the advent of the printing press at the start of the modern era facilitated literacy and fueled the spread of ideas. Within months of posting his 95 Theses for scholarly debate on the Wittenberg campus, Martin Luther's ideas spread across Germany then all of Europe. He quickly became famous, then infamous.

Luther's great gift was not simply as a theologian but as a communicator, as the world's first mass-media figure, its first *brand*. Luther spread his works among the four printers in Wittenberg. Luther's pamphlets had a "look". Luther ensured that printers would include "Martin Luther of Wittenberg" on the title page. The artist Lucas Cranach created the look of Luther's pamphlets. This included the distinct highlighting of the words. Cranach also created the iconic portraits of Luther that made the reformer such a familiar figure to his fellow Germans.

In our time this speaks to the importance of sharing the story of everything we are doing as the church in a consistent, thoughtful, and appealing manner. It is true that if we are focused on living our lives as disciples and reaching out to bring others to discipleship, Bethlehem will be well on the way to revitalization. But, how much more of an impact will we have if we are communicating the stories of what God is up to at Bethlehem in the lives of our members and in our community in appealing ways? Our goal is not to become the most well-known church in the area. Our goal is to live as disciples who make disciples as we share the Gospel of Christ.



Church Visits

As I visited churches, I was not looking to figure out what they are doing that we can do and somehow grow like they may be doing. I was looking for signs of revitalization. I wanted to see if they have all the needed pieces and if they have put them in place for revitalization.

Faith Lutheran, Okemos

This was the closest, most comfortable place for me to worship on Sunday mornings. I worshipped there on three occasions. What I experienced felt to me like a faith community trying to live the Gospel. Pastor Ellen Schoepf is very progressive in her personal beliefs and *not afraid* to lead the congregation to live their mission (which reflects her beliefs and the Gospel of Jesus Christ). They are a Reconciling in Christ congregation, which means that they have gone through the process of creating a welcoming statement for all people regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual identity, or anything else that separates God's children. They are deeply involved with the care of creation. Attendance varied between my visits, but it never felt empty. And folks were very welcoming, until they learned I was just a visiting pastor (though they were still friendly). They expressed vitality in that their programs, even in the summer, were a clear reflection of who God's people are called to be.

2/42 Community Church, Okemos

This is a church on Bennett Rd. just across from our subdivision. It is one of I believe 7 campuses of the 2|42 Community Church around central and southeast Michigan. The lights were dark in the fellowship hall, which becomes their worship space with padded chairs. It was too dark for me to get a good count of how many people were there, and too dark for me to tell if I knew anyone. The stage was well lit, and the musicians seemed very professional. They played two songs with lyrics projected on the screen. After they played, the campus pastor took the stage in his skinny jeans and gave some announcements that were less concerned with mission and more concerned with saving souls. He told the gathering that among their 7 campuses, 81 believers had been baptized year-to-date. After he spoke, a young female came on who introduced herself as something like the Christian Education Pastor. She preached a 45-minute sermon that was decent (though it could have been shortened considerably and improved a bit). No one that we saw seemed to bring a Bible. After the message, the campus pastor returned to introduce the offering and the reflection time that would follow. During the reflection time he encouraged people to pray however and wherever they wanted, he invited folks interested to visit their "Next Steps" table in the lobby to learn more about membership, and he invited those who wished to take prefilled communion cups sealed with wafers from a basket in the back to receive during their own prayer and reflection. Then the band returned to play some instrumental music for the reflection period and offering buckets being passed before playing two more songs to close. We left after worship ended with no one greeting or approaching us. I am not sure when, or if, we prayed together, but there was no Lord's Prayer. I am sure we prayed after the sermon, but I was troubled by their being no Cross in the worship space.

Did they show signs of vitality? I would say that they were strong on evangelism, but weak on prayer and mission. It is not about numbers, and again, too dark for me to count, but for all three of their Sunday services their parking lot is close to full.

The Commons Church, Okemos

This is a church on Marsh Rd. in the former Okemos Baptist Church building. The Commons Church is part of Salt Ministries, Inc. Salt Ministries targets college campus towns to attract young people to worship according to their website. The format of worship was very similar to 2|42, but it was a bit brighter in the worship area. They had removed the pews, altar, organ, and piano that had been there. Their website also explained that their musicians are all paid. I did not enjoy the sermon. It wasn't memorable, but long. I do remember the lecture that the pastor gave the congregation on the overturning of Roe v. Wade. He was particularly troubled by what he said was a misunderstanding of the people protesting against the 'Pro Life' Christian community. We left without notice, but we were warmly greeted by an older couple in our row. They were members when it was Okemos Baptist Church. They have stayed. I am guessing that they like the fact that young people from the campus are coming.

How are they showing vitality? They seemed to do a much better job in their announcements focusing on mission opportunities than 2|42. Evangelism is still present, and people were directed to a "Next Steps" table to get more information. Other than the theology expressed from the stage, the volume of the music, and the lack of Communion, I might have felt comfortable worshipping there again.

The People's Church, East Lansing

This is an inter-denominational church in East Lansing. Worship felt very similar to ours and did include Communion because it was the first Sunday of the month. It was well lit so that people could read their bulletins and hymnals. There was one couple with an infant, but the rest in attendance appeared to be well beyond retirement age. In total I would guess they had about 60 folks or so,

I was intrigued by their young adult ministry that is something like "Theology on Tap". I am planning to borrow this as we plan some young adult ministry at Bethlehem. I did not get any sense for mission or evangelism.

Revitalization Plan Background

Bethlehem already has everything we need, at hand, for revitalization. If God can save any person, God can revitalize any church. We have a Biblically based Mission Statement, Purpose Statement, and Guiding Principles. From this we can identify the Biblically based Principles that will guide our (God's) mission and ministry. We have an ever-present God that has been and will continue to be at work through the mission outpost that is Bethlehem Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Bethlehem chose to remain in our neighborhood, and God put us at 549 E. Mt. Hope for a reason. Bethlehem has at least three reasons we need to revitalize:

1. We no longer reflect our neighborhood. Most of our members no longer live near the church.
2. We are an aging congregation.
3. We have not been very effective at reaching our community with the Gospel of Christ. This will involve inviting them to know Jesus and helping everyone to *practice* the Marks of Discipleship.

The process of revitalization is the process by which a church becomes healthier over time. It is true that if God can save any person, God can lead a church to better health. Revitalization is about revitalizing our individual lives as disciples as much as it is about revitalizing the congregation to which we belong. Because the church IS the people, not some building or separate entity.

The #1 reason for the need for church revitalization in churches is that people are attending less frequently. One of our Marks of Discipleship is about encouraging regular Worship attendance. One thing that is true 'after' the pandemic is that the people we have at Bethlehem are here because they really want to be here.

As I write this Revitalization Plan for Bethlehem, I am ever mindful of Proverbs 16:9, "The human mind plans the way, but the Lord directs the steps." We may know where we *think* we want to go, but it is God who leads the way, as God always has throughout the almost 100-year history of Bethlehem.

What follows now are the building Blocks, everything that we need, which we already have, to begin revitalization. We have been guided by our identity as baptized children of God and:
The Great Commission

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

The Great Commandment

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:38-39).

These scriptures and the history of our calling led Bethlehem to produce our faith-filled Mission Statement (Adopted May 7, 2000):

Mission Statement for Bethlehem Evangelical Lutheran Church

As children of God and disciples of Jesus Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, we are called to share God's Word, His love and saving grace by:

- worshipping together
- inviting and welcoming everyone
- studying the Scriptures
- praying
- serving the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of each other, our community, and the world.

From this Biblically based Mission Statement it is clear that we value Christ, Baptism, Worship, Fellowship, Studying Scripture, Prayer, Each Other, Our Community, and Our World.

This mission statement was amplified by an enhanced statement of purpose and guiding principles that was adopted by the congregation on January 29, 2017:

Statement of Purpose and Guiding Principles for Bethlehem Evangelical Lutheran Church

God's purpose for our church, as disciples of Jesus Christ, is to share with all people God's word, love and saving grace. We will pursue this purpose by:

1. Being a Christ-centered, joyful community of baptized believers who gather regularly for worship, the Lord's Supper, study, and prayer.
2. Inviting, accepting, and supporting all people as we build attentive, respectful relationships.
3. Taking action and risks with bold faith, acknowledging our imperfection, while trusting in Christ.
4. Actively engaging in community outreach near and far.
5. Being faithful stewards of our time, talents, possessions, and all of God's creation

From this we can also see that we also value Centeredness, Joyfulness, Eucharist, Welcome, Acceptance, Attentiveness, Respect, Action, Risk Taking (for the sake of Mission), Boldness, Humility, Forgiveness, Wholistic Stewardship, and Creation.

And finally, we live out our Mission, Purpose, & Values in our practicing of the *Marks of Discipleship (PoWER Gifts)*:

As we live out of faith as baptized children of God, we know that Jesus expects us to...

PRAY fervently (Luke 11:9-10 & Matthew 26:41)

WORSHIP faithfully (Matthew 4:10 & John 4:24)

ENCOURAGE one another (Luke 22:32 & John 13:34)

READ the Scriptures daily (Luke 11:28 & Matthew 4:4)

GIVE freely of the gifts we have received from God (Mark 12:17 & Luke 6:38)

INVITE others to know God (Matthew 22:9 & Matthew 28:19-20), and

SERVE all people (Matthew 20:27 & Matthew 25:40)

...and where we fall short of God's expectations, Jesus always offers us his love and forgiveness!

Revitalization Plan

As we think about revitalization the operative question is, “What would bring God the most glory?” We need our members to be excited, focused, and sacrificially committed to the goal of revitalization and reaching our community with the gospel for the long haul. Another way for us to think about revitalization is, “What are we doing to make much of Jesus?” This whole process is about identifying where God is already active in our community and asking how we can be a part of it. The right question for revitalization is not, “How can we save this church?” but rather, “How can God get the most glory from our congregation right now?”

1. Pray - We have formed a prayer team of dedicated prayer warriors who will ensure that our revitalization and staff is prayed for every day. We have also created a process for members to sign up for prayer times throughout the day. As of this publishing date (9/18/22) every half hour from 6:30 am until 10:00 pm has been filled by at least one person! This is just the first of many signs of revitalization yet to come.
2. Invite inactive members to return to Bethlehem and practice the Marks of Discipleship, fully participating in the mission and ministry of Bethlehem, because their faith matters. A gracious letter of invitation will be sent out in sets of 20 or so, starting with people who have become inactive the most recently, and I will then call them the week after. The list of the order of mailing has been compiled by David Westover with input from Jim Whitman, Pastor John, Pastor Matt, Susan Mahoney, and Sue Nelson. When I talk with folks, I will listen for who might be the next best person to contact them. If I leave two messages with no return call that person will be passed on to one of our lay leaders to make a call.
3. We have invited other Lutherans by sending a letter inviting former members of Calvary and St. Stephen to join us in *practicing* The Marks of Discipleship or finding a home with one of the two other remaining ELCA churches in Lansing. This is about strengthening our congregation and attending to the life of faith of Lutherans in the Lansing area.
4. Bible Study and Fellowship for all generations (Re-engaging the seven Marks of Discipleship or *Spiritual Practices*).
 - a. Forming a young adult Fellowship/Bible Study (20s and 30s). This is part of knowing our congregation. Michelle and I are developing this (perhaps Theology on Tap, or something like that).
 - b. Creating fellowship opportunities for the entire congregation.
 - c. Mentoring younger couples.
 - d. Leading a study of the seven Marks of Discipleship that will include the entire congregation.
 - e. And other items with the input of Congregation Council.
5. Begin regular, systematic outreach to our community (x mile radius, yet to be determined), inviting people and asking how we can pray for them. Outreach is key. This could be done by using the Pray & Go model from Church Answers. The cost for this program is \$99. “With Pray & Go, you can create a prayer-centered culture in your church that leads to outward focus and community impact. The complete toolkit walks you through all the steps you need to make prayer a core component of your church’s outreach strategy.” This is about knowing our community, knowing the people whom we are called to serve.

6. Complete the Know Yourself, Know Your Community, & Know Your Church Reports. These reports are often bundled at a cheaper rate.

a. *Know Yourself Report (\$19)*

Through the Know Yourself assessment tool, Church Answers provides a description of the pastor's wiring as it relates to pastoral leadership. This personal assessment will help me understand my own strengths and weaknesses and how I can grow as a leader. Coaching is also recommended.

b. *Know Your Church Report (\$300)*

This 160-question tool is a perception survey for a sampling of members to complete that looks at Fellowship, Discipleship, Evangelism, Worship, Ministry, and Prayer. It is designed to help us identify our strengths we can leverage to address the areas that are growing edges and meet the needs of our community. It takes 15-20 minutes to complete and is anonymous, so the pastor never knows who said what. This will be a way for our members to influence the future direction of Bethlehem. (Some have questioned the cost and length of this survey, so I am investigating a much shorter, free resource from the ELCA.)

c. *Know Your Community Report (\$175)*

This demographic and psychographic report of your community is *key* for our outreach ministry to the community. It will tell us not only who lives in our community (demographics), but also what they prefer (psychographics). It is a definitive, custom 35-page report (x mile radius) that will help us reach and attract our local community.

Plan Notes

1. One distinct possibility given our neighborhood and the physical resources of Bethlehem could be the formation of a basketball program using Upward Sports or a similar model. Coaches for teams would be recruited from the parents/families of children who register for the program. Upward Sports involves Bible Study and faith formation for entire families.
2. *Other needs we may identify in the community could be Divorce Care or Grief Care...*
3. Also, as we revisit and recommit to practicing the Marks of Discipleship, I am envisioning seven paintings, one for each Mark, that people could sign as they commit to living each Mark:



(I am not married to this idea or the color scheme. It just came to me in a moment of inspiration. I am picturing a background of stained-glass windows and the figures acting out each Mark. Our current members will be encouraged to sign each Mark as they commit to practicing that Mark, and then new members can sign as well as we will focus on each Mark in our Discovering Discipleship (new member) Class. I was originally picturing them on the walls of the sanctuary under the corresponding banner, but there may be a better place.)

- Conclusion -

I recognize that this is a lot of information. With this report I wanted to share as much of the information that I could that I took in on my sabbatical that served as background for our Revitalization Plan. I look forward to all questions you might have on my areas of focus of Prayer, Health and Wellness, and Church Revitalization. There is still much work to be done to determine what ministries and programs we have the resources for that will be the most helpful for our community.

Thank you, once again, for this opportunity for study, rest, and reflection. Our vision at Bethlehem has been and will continue to be, "Sharing with All People God's Word, Love, and Saving Grace." Revitalized in this vision we can say, "Thanks be to God. Amen."